United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

Veterinary
Services

Highlights

of the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project

The National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project was a cooperative effort of state agricultural departments; universities; and the following USDA agencies: Cooperative Extension Service (CES), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). Data collection for the study began in 1991 and was completed in 1992. The objectives were to describe heifer health and management on 78 percent of U.S. dairy farms. The following are highlights of the study results:

Laboratory Testing Highlights

- Over 40 percent of the 2,177 dairy calves sampled had immunoglobulin levels below 1,000 mg/dl (milligrams per deciliter). Twenty-two percent of the total calf deaths may be avoided by ensuring adequate colostrum intake which would lead to higher IgG levels.
- NDHEP estimates show that on any given day 22 percent of preweaned heifers are shedding Cryptosporidium. The estimated proportion of farms with the parasite present is more than 90 percent.

Herd Management Highlights

- More producers quarantine dairy and beef calves and young heifers than any other age group, but they represent only 27.9 percent of producers who bring calves and heifers onto the farm.
- Calves in two-thirds of the dairy herds are fed first colostrum from a bucket, bottle, or esophageal feeder. One-third (33.7 percent) of producers allow their calves to nurse; however, 40 percent of those (13.8 percent of total) assist with the process.
- Producers vaccinate dry cows most often against Leptospira, 32.6 percent, and the following viruses: infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), 33.0 percent; bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), 32.0 percent; and parainfluenza type 3 (PI3), 31.1 percent.
- Between 38 and 46 percent of producers vaccinate heifers from weaning to first breeding against IBR, BVD, and PI3 viruses; and 65 percent vaccinate them against Brucella.
- From 44 to 50 percent of producers supplement heifers with vitamins A-D-E in feed. Nine percent inject these vitamins during the birth to weaning stage of development.
- Approximately 54 percent of producers give coccidiostats to their heifers prior to first breeding. Sixty-five percent of producers deworm prior to first breeding.
- The most common areas used for maternity pens are individual animal areas within buildings (44.7 percent) and multiple animal areas in pastures (36.5 percent). Nearly one-third of producers use tiestalls/stanchions.
- The average age at weaning is 7.9 weeks, although 10 percent of dairy producers report weaning their calves by an average age of 4 weeks.
- Almost 90 percent of producers offer calves grain by the time they are 2 weeks of age. A small percentage wait until they are 4 weeks old or more. Between 15 and 22 percent of producers wait to offer forage and water until their calves are 6 weeks old or more.
- Over 30 percent of dairy producers use individual hutches to house their preweaned calves (30.5 percent during the winter and 32.4 percent in the summer). Three out of five hutches in use are less than 5 years of age and approximately 1 percent are over 20 years old.
- Less than 2 percent of dairy producers contract heifers out to be raised for all or part of the replacement growing period.

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